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SUBJECT: Western Sahara: Moroccan University Hosts Conference on  
Autonomy

REF: RABAT 461

¶1. The Faculty of Law, Economy and Social Sciences at Hassan I University in Settat, two hours' drive from Rabat, organized on May 31 and June 1 a conference entitled "What Type of Autonomy for the Southern Provinces?" University President Mohamed Rahj opened the conference, noting that the event was held in answer to the King's call for all sectors of society to join the discussion on autonomy. The key note speaker was Minister of National Education Habib El Malki. The Wali of Settat (a former high-ranking Polisario official), civil society activists, Sahrawi tribal representatives, faculty, and students attended. (One student told us there were about 40 Sahrawi students at the university, and relations between them and the rest of the student body were good). The Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) was the most visible of the political parties, with both SecGen Othmani and parliamentarian Lahcen Daoudi present for the opening remarks. While many diplomats from Rabat were invited, only the Turkish First Secretary and Poloffs made the trek from Rabat.

¶2. The conference was similar to the event held by the PJD in Rabat in April (Ref A), and is the second such conference to be held in Morocco. It featured presentations from Moroccan academics and foreign experts in the field of autonomy and decentralization, with presentations on the Belgian, Spanish, and Canadian models. Presenters discussed regionalization and decentralization and economic considerations such as exploitation of resources. Unlike the PJD event, the conference had time blocked off for "debate" among political party and civil society representatives.

¶3. The conference was prominently featured on the evening news and covered by al Jazeera. A Moroccan political scientist present noted the symbolism of holding the conference in the hometown of ex-Minister of Interior Driss Basri, now in semi-exile in Paris, and suggested that the event represented a positive break from Basri's iron rule of the Sahara during his long tenure as minister under Hassan II.

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